

We're gearing up for fire season 2000. Are you FireWise?

by Doug Newbould

Well, it's that time again. The hours of daylight once again exceed the hours of darkness, the mercury is rising slowly towards "tee-shirt weather," and the dog's footprints are more noticeable on the floor. Fire season can only be just around the corner. I know it doesn't seem that way, when you look out your window at the new snow on your car and those old snow berms along the driveway. But it's true.

The traditional first day of the wildland fire season here in the Cook Inlet area is the 15th of April, a date that signifies many different things (mostly unpleasant) to Americans. As a fire management officer and firefighter, the approach of that date means I need to be ready. Personally, I need to be physically and mentally prepared for the rigors of a six-month fire season. I'm finding the physical part is more and more difficult every year! Professionally, I need to ensure that the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge is ready for the fire season by hiring seasonal firefighters, ordering supplies, checking equipment and getting everybody trained.

I'll have to admit I am not as far along in my preparations as I would like to be at this time of year, but I believe the Refuge fire staff will be ready when the snow finally disappears. How about you? Have you developed a FireWise action plan for your home or business? Have you begun to implement your plan?

If you are one of those folks who know what I'm talking about, this will serve as a friendly reminder to get busy—BEFORE the snow disappears. If you don't have the slightest idea what I am talking about, you might be someone who rarely reads the paper or listens to radio, you may have recently moved here, or perhaps you have a very selective mind that filters out seemingly useless information (my wife often accuses me of filtering out the things she tells me).

If you are among the latter group, I want to tell you about the basic elements of the FireWise Community Action Program and where you can get a free kit for your home or business. Each kit contains a risk analysis for homes (or businesses) in the wildland/urban interface and six pamphlets describing the basic elements of a FireWise Plan.

The first phase of the FireWise program is to assess your home or business for the risks of damage or

destruction from a wildfire. From the assessment, you can identify any deficiencies or needed improvements for your home and property. The second phase of the program develops a plan for making the necessary improvements. All of the "tools" in the FireWise kits are easy to use, and there are many improvements you can make at little or no cost.

The six elements of the FireWise Plan are:

1. Develop and Maintain a FireWise Landscape Around Your Home (to reduce the size and intensity of a wildfire approaching your property by altering the vegetative fuels),
2. Make Sure Emergency Personnel Can Locate and Get to Your Home (with clearly marked signs and/or landmarks and adequate road access),
3. Establish Your Emergency Water Supply (maintain an adequate water supply during a power outage or periods of high demand),
4. Build or Remodel to Make Your Home Resistant to Fire (your home and other structures should be able to survive a wildfire independently of fire suppression agency presence),
5. Fire Safety Inside Your Home (ensure life safety for all family members), and
6. When Wildland Fire Threatens (planning your responses before an emergency to avoid panic and confusion).

You can get a FireWise kit at the local fire station, at the Alaska Division of Forestry office in Soldotna, at Refuge Headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, or at the Home Show at the Peninsula Sports Center on April 29-30.

Wildfires in Alaska can be very scary, especially in dry weather, and FireWise preparation can reduce the fear factor. Spring seems to be starting early this year, and the forests can potentially become quite dry in April and May before the grass greens up and the trees leaf out. I'll admit that it is tempting to burn

slash and trash in the spring when the snow disappears, but this can be the most dangerous time of year for escaped fires. Readers may recall that Homer's Hutler-Mansfield Road fire last June was an escaped slash burn. Burn permits are required for any kind of open burning after April 15th, and can be obtained by calling the Alaska Division of Forestry office at 262-

4124 in Soldotna.

Doug Newbould is a fire management officer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For more information about the Refuge, stop by Headquarters at the top of Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call (907) 262-7021 or visit our website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.